

# We need to swallow our pride, and think again

The fourth book in our Bite-Size book series ‘Brexit and Northern Ireland: Bordering on Confusion?’ has now been published and is available for you to enjoy! We’re celebrating the book’s release by giving you a sneak peek at Peter Osborne’s chapter...

Solving the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has proved intractable in the Brexit process. The issue of the Irish border and backstop could potentially derail an agreed Brexit creating significant economic damage to both parts of the island as well as undermining the peace achieved by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Edited by ex-BBC journalist John Mair and Dr Steven McCabe from the Centre for Brexit Studies at Birmingham City University, as well as Leslie Budd from the Open University and Neil Fowler, the book includes a foreword from long-standing Northern Ireland commentator Malachi O’Doherty and an afterword by Daily Mail journalist Peter Osborne.

The book examines the range of questions about Brexit and Northern Ireland from a wide variety of perspectives and is a major contribution to the debate about the issues.

***Enjoy your sneak peek below...***

## **We need to swallow our pride, and think again**

In August 2019 I flew into Dublin and travelled to Bessbrook, a town in South Armagh near the Irish border. I wanted to hear what local people felt about the prospect of a hard border returning to Ireland, a prospect looking increasingly likely since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister.

The first person I approached was an elderly man crossing a road. He was kind enough to talk to me. I said to him we’re now two months away from a potential no-deal Brexit and that probably means a hard border here. I asked him what he thought of that.

“Disaster, absolute disaster”, he said.

Further questioning revealed this man was Alan Black, the sole survivor of the Kingsmill Massacre.

On January 5, 1976, Alan and ten of his friends, all of them Protestant workmen, were returning home on a minibus. They were stopped by gunmen, lined up and shot.

Alan told me “to even think about going back to those days is unthinkable.” He warned that a border would become a target for violence. That the police would be brought in to protect the border and that the army would be brought in to protect the police.

It was humbling to meet somebody who had survived such a violent and tragic event and to hear his words. And I heard the same message from everyone I spoke to, Protestant and Catholic.

Jarlath Burns, headmaster of St Paul’s High School in Bessbrook, told me that when signs saying ‘Welcome to Northern Ireland’ were put up at various points along the border they lasted less than 24-hours.

Some were torn down, others riddled with bullet holes. “What chance does any border infrastructure have if those signs didn’t last 24 hours?” he asked.

Of course, it’s worth remembering that there were many reasons for voting for Brexit. Differences in wealth. A sense of people not being in control of their lives. Legitimate fears of loss of jobs and status. A sense that Britain wasn’t working for many people.

In the Brexit debate Northern Ireland did not go unmentioned. It was however neglected. Few in Britain, myself included, understood the complexities of managing a land border with the EU in Northern Ireland.

And today senior British politicians appear ready to betray the Good Friday Agreement – and potentially with it the hard-fought but fragile peace it has brought to Ireland.

Boris Johnson had not visited the border in his role as Foreign Secretary nor has he done so as Prime Minister. Chief EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, on the other hand, had visited five times before August and was soon to return for a sixth.

## **What I thought in 2016**

I voted to leave the EU in 2016.

Like millions of others I voted for what I thought were honourable principled reasons. Most of my personal friends are Brexiteers. They are – with a few exceptions – decent, patriotic people.

They are driven by one great solemn idea, namely that democracy can only exist and flourish within a nation state. For me this argument remains valid – and powerful. I respect those who say yes, all this is worth it to pursue a dream of independence. It is a noble dream. I share it. It is founded on Britain's historic role as a proud nation that has repeatedly fought for freedom and liberty.

It's an exaggeration to say the European Union is anti-democratic, but it is not democratic.

This leads to a problem. The politicians operating at a national level are accountable for decisions made in Brussels or Berlin for which they have no responsibility.

We have seen a great deal of this over the last ten years. In Italy, Greece and other countries politicians have been obliged to enforce brutal programmes of economic austerity whether they like it or not.

Politicians and ministers were unable to respond to popular concerns about immigration because membership of the European Union meant they were unable to back words with action.

When she was home secretary, Theresa May kept promising to combat the relatively high levels of immigration. The reality was she was powerless to do anything about it.

## **This is not 1939**

I, too, am conscious of history. In the 18th century we stood against the Bourbon dream of European hegemony. We liberated Europe from the Napoleonic domination of continental Europe at the start of the 19th century. And faced up to Nazi Germany in 1940.

But this is not 1939 or the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. History gets made and remade all the time.

The European Union is not a dictatorship, as contemptuous of national identity as Napoleonic France.

Nor can it be compared to Nazi Germany – a foolish analogy which has become an ugly cliché and displays an unforgivable failure to understand the true horror of recent European history.

Nor is it any longer a socialist project as envisaged by Jacques Delors, let alone an evil empire, as some have characterised it.

I readily accept that the European Union is a dysfunctional body beset by all manner of problems.

When I cast my vote in 2016 I did not foresee how the popularity of our union in Northern Ireland might weaken, if ease of interchange with the Republic were threatened.

Like almost everybody else I underestimated the importance of the Good Friday Agreement. And we've all misunderstood the Irish question, even though it has loomed so large in our history for the last 500 years.

That's one reason I argue, as a former Brexiteer, that we need to take a long deep breath. We need to swallow our pride, and think again.

**Enjoy more chapters like this from a whole host of contributions by purchasing *Brexit and Northern Ireland: Bordering on Confusion?*. The book is available NOW in paperback and in Kindle. Find out more [here](#).**